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# An Analysis of the Motto Adduced by Wittgenstein for the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus

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AN ANALYSIS OF THE MOTTO ADDUCED BY WITTGENSTEIN FOR THE  
*TRACTATUS LOGICO-PHILOSOPHICUS*

by

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A THESIS

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Advisory Committee

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## ABSTRACT

Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* has this motto: "...and whatever a man knows, whatever is not mere rumbling and roaring that he has heard, can be said in three words."

There is a 'tension' in the *Tractatus* between whether or not ethics may be known. I contend that the motto helps resolve this tension and that therein lies its importance. I address, *inter alia*, the origin of this motto, some philosophical influences on Wittgenstein, the phenomena/noumena distinction and Wittgenstein's distinction between 'sense' and 'nonsense.' I, then, treat Wittgenstein's say/show distinction and how the *Tractatus* beckons not to the poverty of silence but to the richness of activity. Next, I address Wittgenstein's teaching that an ethical insight is not something cognitively reasoned but something compassionately felt. Finally, I interpret the motto as beckoning not to philosophical imponderables but to a principled life.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of presenting philosophy in a *laconic* literary style doubtless holds fascination. Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, for example, trumpets on its title page the following motto: "...and whatever a man knows, whatever is not mere rumbling and roaring that he has heard, can be said in three words." This motto adduced by Wittgenstein anticipates his remark in the Preface: "...what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence."<sup>1</sup>

The motto is divisible into a subject and a predicate. The subject is "...whatever a man knows" which implies epistemic access to knowledge. The predicate is "can be said in three words" which carries an implication of a limitation upon meaningful discourse. Hence, the significance of the motto is that what can be grasped by human knowledge can be verbalized succinctly. However, such significance itself is ambiguous for the reason that it could mean either that we humans do not know much at all or, alternatively, that there is a limitation on how we can express ourselves. I shall consider the former reading in the earlier sections of my thesis where I contend that the motto adumbrates the phenomena/noumena distinction and the sense/nonsense distinction. I shall address the

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<sup>1</sup> D. F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness, *Ludwig Wittgenstein – Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, London: Routledge, 2007, page 3

latter reading in the later sections of my thesis in which I contend that the motto operates on several levels to shed light on the meaning of the text that follows it, one of which is Wittgenstein's innovative say/show distinction. Significantly, with respect to Wittgenstein's treatment of ethics and whether or not we have epistemic access to ethical insights I contend in Section VIII that the motto helps resolve that tension and that therein lies its importance. In the remaining section we see how the motto evokes associations with Ferdinand Kürnberger, the motto's author, whose life exemplified the teaching of the *Tractatus*.

## II. The Motto of the *Tractatus*

Located on the title page of the *Tractatus*, the motto reads: "...und alles, was man weiss, nicht bloss rauschen und brausen gehört hat, lässt sich in drei Worten sagen. Kürnberger."<sup>2</sup>

(1) **The significance of a motto.** A motto can be a maxim adopted as an expression of one's guiding principle as when done by a person or organization. For the purposes of this paper, however, we shall consider a motto as it applies to inanimate objects, in particular, literary works: namely, as a short quotation prefixed to a literary work or to one of its parts, and expressing some idea appropriate to the contents. Strategically, the positioning of the motto on the title page allows it to give a foretaste of what is to come. As to the functions of a motto, they include: (1) to provide the reader a perspective or tone, (2) to specify the meaning of the text that follows, (3) to comment on that text, and (4) to evoke associations with the motto's author or her writings.

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<sup>2</sup> The Pears and McGuinness translation is: "...and whatever a man knows, whatever is not mere rumbling or roaring that he has heard, can be said in three words." Title page of the *Tractatus*.

(2) **The origin of this motto.** The words chosen by Wittgenstein for the *Tractatus*' motto first appeared in “*Das Denkmalsetzen in der Opposition*” published in the *Deutsche Zeitung*, late autumn 1873 by Ferdinand Kürnberger. Ferdinand Kürnberger was born in Vienna on July 3, 1821 and died in Munich on October 14, 1879.<sup>3</sup>

Kürnberger was an Austrian writer who utilized more than one medium: he published both in book form and in newspapers. He, apparently, made quite a reputation for himself as the author of editorial-type articles in the Vienna newspapers called *feuilletons*.<sup>4</sup> The French verb *feuilleter* comes from the root word for ‘leaf’ and means ‘to skim (a book).’ Such articles appeared on the editorial page but below the line and were known to be satirical in nature. An outspoken man, Kürnberger had been called the ‘*Stammvater*’ or founding father of Viennese critical journalism and was likened to ancient Rome’s Cato for his pursuit of truth. Kürnberger is remembered in history more for participation in the Austrian Revolution of 1848 and in the Dresden Rebellion of 1849 than for his literary works. Significantly, he was forced to flee Austria in 1848 and was jailed for his involvement in the Dresden Rebellion of the following year.<sup>5</sup> (It is remarkable that the author of the motto that Wittgenstein chose for his second book, *Philosophical Investigations*, Johann Nestroy, also was jailed more than once for his political activism.<sup>6</sup>)

As remarked in *Wittgenstein’s Vienna*,

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.bookrags.com/biography/ferdinand-kuernberger-dlb> (August 2008)

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> [http://original.britannica.com/eb/article-9046480/Ferdinand-Kuernberger\(August](http://original.britannica.com/eb/article-9046480/Ferdinand-Kuernberger(August) 2008)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1E1-Nestroy.html> (September 2009)

Wittgenstein himself did nothing to cut himself off from the wider literary and cultural traditions with which he was familiar in his youth. His comparative ignorance of the older philosophical classics was counterbalanced by rich and varied familiarity with the main figures on the German and Austrian scene. And the mottoes he chose for his two chief books were taken from authors who could hardly have been more typically Viennese—Kürnberger for the *Tractatus*, Nestroy for the *Investigations*.<sup>7</sup>

While we do not know the full nature and extent of the influence of Kürnberger on Wittgenstein suffice it to say that Wittgenstein was familiar with the reputation of Kürnberger as an activist and outspoken critic of civil authority.

Kürnberger's 1873 article contains a scenario in which he poses a question to a semi-educated person and the same question to a moderately (or well) educated person, receiving two different answers. Kürnberger's question has to do with the difference between ancient and modern art.

Kürnberger writes:

If I ask a semi-educated man: What is the difference between antiquity and modern, between classical and romantic art, he may answer in great confusion: Sir, this question conjures up entire realms of possibilities. This is a matter for entire books and Winter Semesters at university.

If, on the other hand, I ask the same question of a man of moderately or advanced learning, I will invariably receive the answer: Sir, this can be stated in three words. The arts of antiquity issued forth from the body, the arts of modernity arise from the soul. The arts of antiquity were therefore sculptural, while the arts of modernity are lyrical, musical, artistic—in brief—romantic.<sup>8</sup>

It is significant that Kürnberger introduces the reader to his expression 'in three words' in the foregoing passage. The reader can tell that by such expression Kürnberger means to express the idea of something that is 'brief' and 'to-the-point.' This is so

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<sup>7</sup> Allan Janik and Stephen Toulman, *Wittgenstein's Vienna*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973, Introduction, p.27

<sup>8</sup> Translation from German, *Literarische Herzenssachen Reflexionem und Kritiken*, *Deutsche Zeitung*, 1873, pages 339-341

because the semi-educated person was overwhelmed and replied that the answer to that question would take a long time to assemble and narrate. Perhaps, the semi-educated person was incapable of giving a succinct, correct answer for the reason that he did not understand the actual difference between ancient art and modern art.

The well educated person in Kürnberger's essay summarizes his answer succinctly by a contrast between the more physical nature of statuary of the ancients which emphasized the beauty of the human body and the more lyrical nature of romantic art of the then-contemporary times which emphasized the beauty of the human mind.

Kürnberger continues:

Bravo! Thus it is possible for entire worlds of ideas, if one truly masters them, to fit within a nutshell, and everything that one knows that hasn't been dedicated solely to rushing about and shouting can be summed up in three words. And one more thing: If that is in fact the case, then why are we so insistent in setting up monuments to modernity?<sup>9</sup>

Thus, the reader is given by Kürnberger a repetition of his chosen phrase 'in three words' in the succeeding passage and, of course, it is this passage that Wittgenstein chooses as the *Tractatus*' motto. It is in this context that Kürnberger gives the reader the visual image 'in a nutshell' to explain what he meant by 'in three words.' Kürnberger emphasizes that a true grasp of the knowledge of ancient and modern art permitted its knower to be succinct in his response. The moral of the story, so to speak, is that profound concepts could be stated briefly.

What, then, is the significance of the *Tractatus*' motto? It is that what can be grasped through human knowledge can be verbalized succinctly. How and why is that

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, page 340



true? It is true because (1) there is an implied limit to what human knowledge can attain and (2) there is an implied limitation on how human beings can verbalize what we know. We shall consider the former below in Section IV and V and the latter in Section VI to IX.

### III. Some Philosophical Influences on Wittgenstein's Thought

In order to make the connection between the motto and the text of the *Tractatus* let us consider some of the philosophical influences on Wittgenstein's thought.

Georg Henrik von Wright who knew Wittgenstein at Cambridge later wrote the 'Biographical Sketch' of Wittgenstein which was published in Norman Malcolm's 1958 *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*. Professor von Wright remembered that Wittgenstein had personally told him that he (Wittgenstein) had read Schopenhauer's *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* in his youth and that his first philosophy was a Schopenhauerian epistemological idealism.<sup>10</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) is in the Kantian tradition and, of course, made original contributions to philosophy.

Barbara Hannan makes the case that Wittgenstein was substantially influenced by Schopenhauer in a passage in her book:

The *Tractatus* is filled with images and ideas that obviously have their origin in Schopenhauer's work. See particularly 5.6 – 5.641 and 6.423 – 7. These images

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<sup>10</sup>Georg Henrik von Wright, 'Biographical Sketch' in Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958, page 5. This is in harmony with *The Story of Philosophy* where author Bryan Magee wrote: "For the rest of his [Wittgenstein's] life he accepted a view of total reality that saw it as divided between, on the one hand, a realm of which we could have no conceptual understanding and about which we could therefore say nothing, and on the other hand this phenomenal world of our experience, which we could indeed talk about and attempt to understand. Intelligible philosophy, he always thought, had to confine itself to the world we could talk about, on pain of becoming meaningless nonsense if it stepped across the borderline." Bryan Magee, *The Story of Philosophy*, New York: Dorling Kindersley, 2001, page 202

and ideas evidently took root in Wittgenstein's mind when he read WWR [The World as Will and Representation] in his youth.<sup>11</sup>

Accordingly, let us examine some examples from Schopenhauer's philosophy that appealed to the so-called "early Wittgenstein", namely, 'the eye', 'riddle', 'ladder' and 'seeing the world aright.'

Schopenhauer asserts, respecting the 'self', that the subject of representations is a single consciousness in which many diverse experiences of objects are united.<sup>12</sup> One of his favorite metaphorical images for it is the eye that looks out on the world but cannot see itself.<sup>13</sup> Significantly, in section 5.633, Wittgenstein uses the image of a human eye and writes, in part: "But really you do *not* see the eye."

Metaphysics according to Schopenhauer consists in attempting to find the "solution to the riddle of the world."<sup>14</sup> Wittgenstein uses the term 'riddle' twice in the *Tractatus*, declaring at 6.4312 that: "The solution to the riddle of life in space and time lies outside space and time." In the subsection that follows I shall address two images borrowed by Wittgenstein from Schopenhauer relative to ethics.

Two images, 'the ladder' and 'seeing the world aright' both appear in the *Tractatus*' penultimate section, 6.54. The first of these images is traceable to Schopenhauer according to Hans-Johann Glock in his article, "Schopenhauer and

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<sup>11</sup> Barbara Hannan, *The Riddle of the World – A Reconsideration of Schopenhauer's Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, page 16, Footnote 26

<sup>12</sup> Christopher Janaway, *Schopenhauer*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, page 42

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, page 42

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p.18

Wittgenstein – Language as Representation and Will.”<sup>15</sup> The ladder image was first used by Schopenhauer and then put to use in the enigmatic penultimate section of the *Tractatus*, which provides, in part: “(He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)” Glock, then, turns his attention to the ethical posture of one’s attitude to the world and finds a fruitful comparison between Schopenhauer and Wittgenstein. Glock writes: “For both Schopenhauer and Wittgenstein, the good life does not involve any imposition of my will on the course of events, but an attitude—‘seeing the world aright.’”<sup>16</sup>

Schopenhauer was among the first of the 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophers to accept that, at its core, the universe is not a rational place.<sup>17</sup> In *The Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Cause*, Schopenhauer critically examines the disposition to assume that what is real is what is rational.<sup>18</sup> Schopenhauer’s originality resides in his conception of the Will as being devoid of rationality or intellect.<sup>19</sup> Life requires us to face a world that is endless striving and blind impulse with no end in view, lawless, absolutely free, entirely self-determining and almighty.<sup>20</sup> In effect, Schopenhauer’s metaphysics determines his ethics; the result is a world that is indifferent to us but in which we have an ethics of compassion for fellow travelers to the grave. Hannan, cited above, continues her description of Schopenhauerian ethics: “Since nothing can be justified outside the

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<sup>15</sup> Hans-Johann Glock, “Schopenhauer and Wittgenstein-Language as Representation and Will”, ed. Christopher Janaway, *The Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pages 434 -442

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p.442

<sup>17</sup> Robert Wicks, “Arthur Schopenhauer”, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, page 1, <http://www.plato.stanford.edu/> (November 2007)

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, page 5

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, page 10

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, page 12

structures imposed by reason, this mystical ethical insight, and the way people attain it, must remain, ultimately, a mystery. It is felt, not reasoned.”<sup>21</sup> As we shall see in Section VIII, below, Wittgenstein executes his own turn from the cognitive to the non-cognitive regarding ethics.

Another respected American philosopher, Max Black, whose *A Companion to Wittgenstein's Tractatus* is iconic, writes about Schopenhauer's influence on the author of the *Tractatus*: “Parts of the book date back to 1913 and some of the concluding remarks on ethics and the will may have been composed still earlier, when Wittgenstein admired Schopenhauer.”<sup>22</sup> As noted above Professor von Wright was told by Wittgenstein that his first philosophy was a Schopenhauerian epistemological idealism. Janaway considers this matter to be well-settled. He writes that

Wittgenstein ... did not come across Schopenhauer's works in an academic setting. He read them as part of the stock of ideas with which Viennese high society was furnished.... In fact, not to have read Schopenhauer would have been the odd thing for a young person from a cultured family such as Wittgenstein's.<sup>23</sup>

As remembered by Professor von Wright, above, and as attested to by the historian of philosophy, Magee, above, the early Wittgenstein existed in the Kantian-Schopenhauerian tradition of the phenomena/noumena distinction. This tradition accepted that it is an imperfect world in which we live, that, although we may wish to have epistemic access to the noumenal world, we are restricted to access to the world of

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<sup>21</sup> *op. cit.*, Hannan, page 92-93

<sup>22</sup> Max Black, *A Companion to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1964, page 1

<sup>23</sup> *op. cit.*, Janaway, *Schopenhauer*, page 104-105

phenomena. Hence, despite a desire for a thorough knowledge of reality we are limited to the knowledge of what we perceive through the five senses.

In the section that follows I shall consider how the motto adumbrates the phenomena/noumena distinction that imbues the *Tractatus*.

#### IV. The Phenomena/ Noumena Distinction.

This phenomena/noumena distinction and the limit to what human knowledge can attain are reflected in the *Tractatus*.<sup>24</sup>

In 4.113, we see that “Philosophy sets limits to the much disputed sphere of natural science.” At 4.114 we see that philosophy: “must set limits to what can be thought; and, in doing so, to what cannot be thought. It must set limits to what cannot be thought by working outwards through what can be thought.”

For Wittgenstein, then, the application of the techniques of philosophical analysis to natural science has the wholesome effects of clarifying and elucidating scientific thoughts, up to the point of acknowledging the limits of knowledge. Philosophy, when put into practice, disciplines the thinker to stay within the realm of natural science, *i.e.* what can be known, on pain of sliding into meaningless, nonsensical speculation if one crosses the borderline into what cannot be thought. The aforementioned sections of the *Tractatus* clearly reflect that a true philosopher is not only justified but affirmatively required to adhere to the evidence and metrics of the scientific method, the realm of phenomena.

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<sup>24</sup> *op. cit.*, Pears and McGuinness, See 4.113, 4.114, 4.115, 4.116 and 6.53.

Wittgenstein continues with his following aphorism about philosophy: “It will signify what cannot be said, by presenting clearly what can be said.” (4.115) and “Everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly. Everything that can be put into words can be put clearly.” (4.116)

For Wittgenstein, then, philosophy has the felicitous result of signifying what speculation to avoid by pointing out the fruitful field of natural science. The aforementioned sections of the *Tractatus* reflect that a true philosopher will abhor the conjecture and speculation associated with the noumenal realm and will warm to his work with a zeal for clarity and precision in her work that will withstand scientific scrutiny and will pass scientific muster. This is so because the subject matter of natural science is amenable to study, is intelligible to the thinker and is susceptible of a reasoned account. Further, what the thinker comprehends in thought can be articulated and clearly so.<sup>25</sup>

As the bottom brick in his bag, so to speak, near the conclusion of his treatise Wittgenstein opines in 6.53:

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<sup>25</sup> As pointed out in my Introduction, the motto of the *Tractatus* hyperbolically praises succinctness when it trumpets that whatever a man knows can be said in three words. Deftly Wittgenstein echoes and reinforces that sentiment in Section 5.4541 which provides, in pertinent part:

Men have always had a presentiment that there must be a realm in which the answers to questions are symmetrically combined—a priori—to form a self-contained system. A realm subject to the law: *Simplex sigillum veri*.

A free translation would be ‘Simplicity is the guarantor of truth.’ In section 5.4541, Wittgenstein can be understood to mean the value of simplicity as an explanatory power is the persuasiveness of its lack of artifice and fraud. In science, as we know, there is the principle of parsimony under which the hypothesis proposed as a solution is best when it requires the fewest assumptions of the scientific community.

The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, *i.e.* propositions of natural science---*i.e.* something that has nothing to do with philosophy....

In the section that follows I shall address how the motto supports Wittgenstein's impulse to distinguish sense from nonsense through a regimentation of language and focus on the propositions of natural science.

#### V. The Distinction between 'Sense' and 'Nonsense.'

Wittgenstein employs three technical vocabulary words in the *Tractatus*, namely, 'sense' (*Sinn*), 'senseless' (*Sinnlos*) and 'nonsense' (*Unsinnig*).

He first uses the term 'sense' in Section 2.221 as follows: "What a picture represents is its sense." By way of commentary he immediately adds in Section 2.222: "The agreement or disagreement of its sense with reality constitutes its truth or falsity."

Then, in contrast to 'sense' Wittgenstein yields up his technical use of 'senseless', which for him means lacking a sense or in the state of being without a sense. At Section 5.132, he writes: "'Laws of inference', which are supposed to justify inferences, as in the works of Frege and Russell, have no sense, and would be superfluous." An example of the foregoing would be a logical proposition, such as, a tautology about which there is more later in Section VI, below.

Third, and finally, as to the technical term 'nonsense', as so concisely put by the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy article, "Ludwig Wittgenstein", "Nonsense, as opposed to senselessness, is encountered when a proposition is even more devoid of meaning, when it transcends the bounds of sense." Especially instructive is Section 4.003 which provides:

Most of the propositions and questions to be found in philosophical works are not false but nonsensical. Consequently, we cannot give any answers of this kind, but can only point out that they are nonsensical. Most of the propositions and questions of philosophers arise from our failure to understand the logic of our language.

(They belong to the same class as the question whether the good is more or less identical than the beautiful.)

And it is not surprising that our deepest problems are *not* problems at all.

We know, with confidence, from his Preface, that Wittgenstein's self-proclaimed aim of the *Tractatus* is to "draw a limit to thought, or rather—not to thought, but to the expression of thoughts:...." Further, the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy article mentioned above goes on to conclude that Wittgenstein's aim in the *Tractatus* was "to find the limits of world, thought and language; in other words, to distinguish between sense and nonsense." Such a view of the *Tractatus*, the traditional view, has it that Wittgenstein's aim was to silence metaphysical conjecture by presenting his analysis of sense versus nonsense, including his theory that makes clear what can and cannot be said. This traditional view of the *Tractatus* jibes well with the conclusion contained within the Motto.

Taken together, what seems clear from the above-cited passages is that Wittgenstein advocates a disciplined, rigorous approach to learning, one that realizes its limitations. If, as Wittgenstein teaches, we humans are limited to natural science in our ability to formulate meaningful thoughts, then, comparatively speaking, our universe of learning must be smaller than if there were no such limitation upon us. Stated differently, if, as Wittgenstein teaches, we are limited to the realm of natural science, then we in our human condition cannot really know very much. What we can know is most assuredly



not absolute but, rather, qualified. What we can know is only that which is within the realm of natural science and not otherwise. The *Tractatus*' motto ("whatever a man knows...can be said in three words.") exemplifies that idea.

Next, let us consider one example of something that Wittgenstein posited as falling outside the limits of what we can know. Characteristically, Wittgenstein shunned pronouncements concerning ethical imperatives telling us: "So too it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics." (6.42). Given that language marks the limits of our world and what can be known, we have evidence to think that ethics falls outside of what can be known.

I corresponded with Professor Victor Rodych who has the honor of being the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* author of the 2007 article, "Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Mathematics." On the connection of the *Tractatus*' motto to ethics, Professor Rodych writes:

Still the foregoing combination of the Preface and the motto does obviously apply to ethical pseudo-propositions. We cannot know such a 'proposition' to be true because they are not genuine propositions; one does not make an assertion with a declarative sentence of that form. (Correspondence, August 28- September 2, 2008)

Rodych emphasizes that just as the motto brings our attention to certain propositions as legitimate (those of natural science), it also rules out certain propositions (the ethical and the mystical) as illegitimate.

In the section that follows I shall address how the motto reflects Wittgenstein's say/show distinction and the way it leaves room for Wittgenstein's view of ethics as ineffable but still important.

#### VI. Wittgenstein's Say/Show Distinction.

A tantalizing paradox in the *Tractatus* is that the same author who claims that what can be known can be said succinctly is the very author who manages to say appreciably much spread across the eighty plus printed pages of his treatise. Bertrand Russell did not let this fact go unremarked in his Introduction to the *Tractatus* where, in two places on pages xxiii-xxiv, he gently chides Wittgenstein on this point. Russell writes: "What causes hesitation is the fact that, after all, Mr Wittgenstein manages to say a good deal about what cannot be said...." and, second, "The whole subject of ethics, for example, is placed by Mr Wittgenstein in the mystical, inexpressible region. Nevertheless, he is capable of conveying his ethical opinions." I do concur with Russell's points and I maintain that we, Wittgenstein included, are all able to express a great deal. Let us consider, next, the force and justice of Wittgenstein's position on this point, however, in light of his famous 'say/show distinction.'

In his 'Biographical Sketch' of Wittgenstein mentioned above, Professor von Wright makes it clear that a main ingredient of the *Tractatus* is the introduction of Wittgenstein's doctrine of that which cannot be *said*, but can only be *shown*. Wittgenstein's teaching is that we use propositions in the form of sentences in language to express ourselves but language has built-in limitations that mask and disguise the underlying logical form. As treated above, Wittgenstein held that we may say meaningful

things in natural science but when we venture beyond natural science our pronouncements become pseudo-propositions of no value and inherently meaningless. Nevertheless, even though certain things may not be said, it is still possible for things to be shown.

Consider an especially simple kind of logical truth, the tautology. A proposition in the form of ' $p \vee \neg p$ ' is an instance of the principle known as the law of the excluded middle. Every instance of this principle is a tautology. At Section 4.461 of the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein wrote:

Propositions show what they say: tautologies and contradictions show that they say nothing.

A tautology has no truth-conditions, since it is unconditionally true: and a contradiction is true on no condition.

Tautologies and contradictions lack sense.<sup>26</sup>

In Section 4.0031 we learn, apparently via Bertrand Russell, that human language disguises the underlying logical form of a proposition. In Section 4.022 we learn that a proposition shows how things stand if it is true. Accordingly, what a proposition shows is a possible state of affairs. In order for a statement to say something it is required that such statement be either true or false in accordance with the reality of the world.

Not so, however, for a proposition of logic, such as, 'If p, then q.' A proposition of logic is a device that may be used over and over and has no truth value. It can show, but not say.

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<sup>26</sup> There is a string of relevant citations to the *Tractatus* that bears on the limitation on how humans can verbalize what we know and on the show/say distinction. *op. cit.*, Pears and McGuinness, See: 4.0031; 4.022; 4.0312; 4.115; 4.12; 4.121; 4.1211, 4.1212, together with 6.1, 6.11 and 6.12.

Additionally, in section 4.0312 we learn that logical constants do not represent. In Section 4.115 we learn that philosophy will signify what cannot be said, by presenting clearly what can be said. Hence, in due course, in Sections 4.12 through 4.1212 we learn, *inter alia*, that propositions show the logical form of reality, that they do so by displaying it, and that what can be shown, cannot be said.

Finally, with respect to the foregoing string of citations, 6.1 provides: “The propositions of logic are tautologies.” and is followed by “Therefore the propositions of logic say nothing. (They are analytic propositions.)” (6.11) Wittgenstein, then, emphasizes in 6.12: “The fact that the propositions of logic are tautologies *shows* the formal—logical—properties of language and the world.”

Accordingly, notwithstanding the limit to what human knowledge can attain and, further, notwithstanding its implication that what we can say is very limited, it remains true that the form of our expressions manages to communicate a great deal. One commentator on the foregoing sections calls their teaching the ‘showing doctrine’, which is said to be manifested via the notion of ‘logical space’ and presents a sharp dichotomy between what we can express and what we can only manifest.<sup>27</sup> Significantly, the commentator concludes:

The tension between showing and saying is salient already in the motto of the *Tractatus* where Wittgenstein quotes Kurnberger’s dictum “...and whatever a man knows, whatever is not mere rumbling and roaring that he has heard, can be said in three words.” Here the tension is between the multiple content of knowledge and the severely limited amount of meaningful words that can express

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<sup>27</sup> Shlomy Maulem, “Language as a Twofaced Phenomenon: Wittgenstein’s Doctrine of Showing in the Light of Heraclitus’ Concept of *Logos*”, *Topicos Revisita de Filosofia* (Mexico) (2001), [http://firstsearch.oclc.org/WebZ/FSPage?pagename=record:pagetype=print:entityprinting=\(September 2008\)](http://firstsearch.oclc.org/WebZ/FSPage?pagename=record:pagetype=print:entityprinting=(September 2008))

it, so that these three words must manifest much more than they can express; it comes out that singularity encloses generality. Such a tension between the particular and generality underlies Wittgenstein's 'showing doctrine', as will be demonstrated hereby via the concept of 'logical space', which is one of the key notions of the *Tractatus*.<sup>28</sup>

In this passage we see the idea that the motto embodies the say/show distinction in its declaration that everything a man knows can be expressed in "three words." Rather than consider this from the perspective of the poverty of what can known, we can now consider the motto from the perspective of the power of our language to show a great deal of what cannot explicitly be said.

Furthermore, this above suggestion brings us to a different perspective on ethics. In fact Wittgenstein does not abjure the word 'ethics' and that word is expressly used near the end of the *Tractatus*. As noted earlier, in 6.42 he expands upon a point already made above by adding: "So too it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics. Propositions can express nothing that is higher." However, immediately following is 6.421 which provides: "It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words. Ethics is transcendental. (Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same.)." It seems that ethics falls under the category of what cannot be said but can be shown.

A concrete explanation of Wittgenstein's fascination with the so-called ineffability of ethics is contained in an exchange of letters between Engelmann and Wittgenstein. On April 4, 1917, Engelmann wrote enclosing the poem "Count Eberhard's Hawthorn" by the poet Uhland. It is a short, 28-line poem, which happens to be exactly twice the length of the standard British sonnet. Uhland, in that short plot of ground,

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<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*

manages to recount the story of a soldier who brought home from war with him a sprig cut from a Hawthorn bush which he, then, planted at home. Much later, in his old age, the veteran sits beneath the shade of the flourishing adult Hawthorn tree, which serves as poignant reminder of his youth. Five days after having received that letter Wittgenstein, on April 9, 1917, wrote a thank-you letter to Engelmann in which he praised the poem as “really magnificent.” Wittgenstein enthused: “And this is how it is: if only you do not try to utter what is unutterable then *nothing* gets lost. But the unutterable will be – unutterably—*contained* in what has been uttered.”

This collateral document helps to ‘cash out’ Wittgenstein’s position on ineffability. Certainly, his letter, on its face, communicates that a poet is able, by indirection, to create an emotional reaction in her reader. Uhland’s poetry succeeded in creating a mood, touching a chord within Wittgenstein.<sup>29</sup>

In the section that follows I shall show how the motto and the Preface of the *Tractatus* and the concluding line of the *Tractatus* point to a life characterized by activity.

VII. The *Tractatus* Beckons not to the Poverty of Silence but to the Richness of Activity.

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<sup>29</sup> ‘The lunatic, the lover, and the poet  
Are of imagination all compact:  
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold,  
That is , the madman: the lover , all as frantic,  
Sees Helen’s beauty in a brow of Egypt:  
The poet’s eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,  
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to  
heaven;  
And as imagination bodies forth  
The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen  
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name.’  
William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer’s Night Dream*, Act V, Scene I

It is crystal clear that Wittgenstein composed his treatise, the *Tractatus*, with a hierarchical structure with main propositions numbered 1 through 7. What this means for Proposition 7 is that, although it is terse and often read as blended into the aphorisms of Section 6, it is, in actuality, the opening of a brand new, and main, section of the *Tractatus*.

Just what is the meaning of Proposition 7? Is it in the sphere of logic...or more in the sphere of ethics, in keeping with its next preceding neighbors in Section 6?

In his biography of Wittgenstein, Ray Monk writes: "The famous last sentence of the book- 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent' - expresses both a logico-philosophical truth and an ethical precept."<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, in *Wittgenstein's Tractatus – A Dialectical Interpretation*, Matthew B. Ostrow opines:

And that is to say that to "go on" with the task of the *Tractatus* is ultimately just to acknowledge the "must" in the text's final remark – "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one *must remain* silent" (TLP 7)-as the mark not of logical necessity but of ethical obligation."<sup>31</sup>

Significantly, the *Tractatus* contains a lengthy and instructive section on the nature and function of correct philosophy. Section 4.112 reads:

Philosophy aims at the logical clarification of thoughts.  
Philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an *activity*.  
A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations.  
Philosophy does not result in 'philosophical propositions', but rather in the clarification of propositions.  
Without philosophy thoughts are, as it were, cloudy and indistinct: its task is to make them clear and to give them sharp boundaries.

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<sup>30</sup> Raymond Monk, *Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*, London, Vintage, 1990, page 156

<sup>31</sup> Matthew B. Ostrow, *Wittgenstein's Tractatus – A Dialectical Interpretation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2002, page 133

One of the important insights of the *Tractatus*, according to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article cited above, is the idea that philosophy is not a doctrine, and hence should not be approached dogmatically. In fact, for Wittgenstein, who worked as a full-time schoolmaster in Austria after World War I, philosophy was the enterprise of living life each day.

Cora Diamond, in her article, “Ethics, Imagination and the Method of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*”, posits a useful technique for interpreting the *Tractatus*. She accepts Wittgenstein’s pronouncement that his treatise is not a textbook and, further, that there is a kind of reading that it requires. She goes on to visualize a ‘frame’ of the work consisting of the *Tractatus*’ Preface and its closing sentences. In his Preface, of course, Wittgenstein flatly states: “The whole sense of the book may be summed up in the following words: what can said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence.” He, then, in the next sentence writes out the aim of his book respecting the drawing of limits to the expression of thoughts.

To complete the description of Diamond’s frame, however, requires us to take note of the closing sentences of the *Tractatus*. Here is where a misconstrual can and does occur. The antepenultimate sentence of the *Tractatus* begins Section 6.54 with its startling revelation by the author that his propositions are ‘nonsensical’ and, further, in the penultimate sentence, that the reader must transcend them in order to see the world aright. For some readers the spell cast by those two revelations lingers on to impact the meaning of the next main section of the *Tractatus*, which consists entirely of one



proposition, namely, the final sentence of the *Tractatus*: “7 What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.”

I am impressed by Ostrow’s insight:

Given the emphasis of so much recent literature on 6.54, one might well suppose that this remark was in fact the text’s final statement that Wittgenstein leaves us with his pronouncement of the nonsensicality of everything philosophical. In fact, though, the *Tractatus* ends with propositions 7’s call for silence....Wittgenstein’s claims, it would seem, find their real fulfillment not in what we say, but in what we *do*.<sup>32</sup>

Accordingly, interpreting the last line of the *Tractatus* as not leading to the poverty of silence but to the richness of activity, arguably, is foreshadowed in the *Tractatus*’ Preface which itself is anticipated by the motto.

In the next section of my thesis I shall show how Wittgenstein, with homage to Schopenhauer, teaches how one has access to an ethical insight.

VIII. Wittgenstein Teaches that an Ethical Insight is not Something that is Cognitively Reasoned but Something Compassionately Felt.

Under Section VI above, I conclude that one of the *Tractatus*’ teachings is that language marks the limits of what can be known and that ethics falls outside of what can be known. A tension is created later in Section VI when I conclude that even though certain things, such as ethics, may not be said, it is, nevertheless, possible for them to be shown. Can ethics, according to the *Tractatus*, be known or not? How does one resolve that tension?

As indicated in Section III above, Schopenhauer is in the Kantian tradition and, according to both Kant and Schopenhauer, total reality is divisible into what is

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<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, page 13-14

susceptible of being known and what is not. By construing the *Tractatus*, a document written by an Austrian in his native German language, in light of Schopenhauer's substantial *oeuvre*, one arrives at a world view that reality is divisible into what can be known and what cannot, into what is rational and what is not, and into what is cognitive and what is non-cognitive.

The pessimism of Schopenhauer when he looked out on a state of nature that was “red in tooth and claw”, on a world of blind impulse devoid of rationality and on a cold, indifferent universe was not lost on the young and brooding Ludwig. He used Schopenhauerian idealism as his point of departure and contributed to posterity such novel and philosophically-freighted aphorisms as “*How* things are in the world is a matter of complete indifference for what is higher.” (Section 6.432); “It is not how things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists. (Section 6.44); and “There are indeed things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical.” (Section 6.522)

Significantly, according to Glock, Wittgenstein characterizes mysticism by reference to two features:

1. It not only lies beyond all possible knowledge, but is also incommunicable or ineffable, something ‘which cannot be put into words’ but ‘shows itself’....
2. It is a feeling of union with God or the universe, a ‘consciousness of the identity of one’s own inner being with that of all things, or with the kernel of the world.’<sup>33</sup>

My contention is that the perceived tension between having no epistemic access to ethics and how ethics is made manifest is not a real tension but an apparent one.

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<sup>33</sup> *op. cit.*, Janaway, *The Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer*, page 441

Wittgenstein, like Schopenhauer before him, executes a turn from the cognitive to the non-cognitive. Wittgenstein never purports to be able to know ethical commandments or to have meaningful discourse about such. Instead, his ethics is the result of his confrontation with the indifference of the universe.<sup>34</sup>

Wittgenstein saw combat in World War I. His biographer Monk records that while Wittgenstein was at the battlefield, from March to May, 1916, he was able to write little on logic in his diary-type notebooks. Significantly, an entry in his notebook from that time period found its way unchanged into the *Tractatus* which we now read as Sections 6.371 and 6.372:

The whole conception of the world is founded on the illusion that the so-called laws of nature are the explanations of natural phenomena.  
Thus people today stop at the laws of nature, treating them as something inviolable, just as God and Fate were treated in past ages.

In the ensuing months the combat intensified in Wittgenstein's sector under the assault of the Brusilov Offensive in June, 1916. It was precisely at this time that the nature of Wittgenstein's work changed, Monk tells us.<sup>35</sup> On June 11, 1916, Wittgenstein recorded in his notebook the question: "What do I know about God and the purpose of life?" Monk concluded that it was as if, for Wittgenstein, "...the personal and the philosophical became fused; ethics and logic—two aspects of the 'duty to oneself'—had

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<sup>34</sup> Joseph Conrad is one writer who was strongly influenced by Schopenhauer. A friend of Conrad's was the American writer Stephen Crane who, in his short story *The Open Boat* writes about sailors undergoing shipwreck: "When it occurs to a man that nature does not regard him as important, and she feels that she would not maim the universe by disposing of him, he at first wishes to throw bricks at the temple, and he hates deeply the fact that there are no bricks and no temple." and, again, "It represented... the serenity of nature amid the struggles of the individual—nature in the wind, and nature in the vision of men. She did not seem cruel to him then, nor beneficent, nor treacherous, nor wise. But she was indifferent, flatly indifferent." Stephen Crane, *The Open Boat, Gateway to the Great Books*, Volume 3, Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1963, pages 19-22

<sup>35</sup> *op.cit.*, Monk, page 139-140

finally come together, not merely as two aspects of the same personal task, but as two parts of the same philosophical work.”<sup>36</sup>

When Wittgenstein writes about God he does so in a metaphorical manner, that is, equating the meaning of life with “the meaning of the world, which we can call God.”<sup>37</sup>

We are able to construe the *Tractatus* in light of his “A Lecture on Ethics” that Wittgenstein delivered to the Heretics Society, Cambridge University in November, 1929.<sup>38</sup> In it he rehearses for his live audience “the experience of feeling absolutely safe.” He equates this feeling with the state of mind in which one is inclined to say ‘I am safe, nothing can injure me whatever happens.’ He, then, explains that people use an allegorical explanation for this feeling by describing the experience of absolute safety by saying that “we feel safe in the hands of God.” Wittgenstein, in recognizing and accepting his fate as an insignificant part of the greater universe, is comfortable with a turn from the cognitive to non-cognitive feeling for his explanation of such an ethical insight.

Hence, there is no fatal flaw in the *Tractatus* with respect to its mentioning of ethics. Yes, Bertrand Russell had gently chided Wittgenstein for appearing to try to have it both ways, not being able to talk about ethics and yet managing to say quite a lot on the topic. But understood as a non-cognitive experience of the indifference of the vast, cold universe toward any and all human beings there is no self-contradiction present. For

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<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, page 141

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, page 141

<sup>38</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, “A Lecture on Ethics”, 1965, *The Philosophical Review*, 74:3-12

Wittgenstein, in the final analysis, ethics is something that he felt, not something about which he reasoned.

IX. The Motto Beckons not to Philosophical Imponderables but to a Principled Life.

The motto is similar to the treatise which it precedes: both have subtexts, both are intentionally obscure while otherwise leaving access open to ethical insights. With respect to the subtext of the motto it is, indeed, helpful in resolving whether or not ethics, according to the *Tractatus*, can be known. Wittgenstein almost certainly invested a great deal of thought and selectivity into his choice of a motto for the *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein chose a non-philosopher, Kürnberger, who lived a principled life and was willing to undergo imprisonment for acting on his convictions concerning the Dresden Rebellion of 1849. Wittgenstein, thereby, paid homage to a personage who exemplified the teaching of the *Tractatus* which beckons one to progress from the poverty of silence to the wealth of activity. The affirmative statement of the motto is pregnant with a negative implication. The negative implication present is that where words fail, activity begins. Not to the poverty of silence does the motto beckon but, rather to the richness of a life of principled action. Hence, by affixing Kürnberger's name to the title page the motto evokes associations with Kürnberger's life. By honoring him thus, Wittgenstein demonstrates the connection between the motto's negative implication and the *Tractatus*' admonition to abandon philosophical imponderables for a commitment to a life lived in the present, therefore, timelessly, and lived in accordance with an ethics of compassion, therefore, lived well.

## X. Conclusion

We have undertaken an analysis of the motto of the *Tractatus* and have demonstrated the connection of the import of the motto with the cited passages of the *Tractatus*.<sup>39</sup> The motto's subject ("whatever a man knows...") implies epistemic access to knowledge. The motto's predicate ("...can be said in three words."), however, alerts us to a limitation upon meaningful discourse. The motto is facially ambiguous for the reason that it is susceptible of two readings. First, it could mean that we humans do not know much at all. Or, second, it could mean that there is a limitation on how we can express ourselves. Under the first reading we have seen how the motto adumbrates the phenomena/noumena distinction and the sense/nonsense distinction that imbue the *Tractatus*. Under the second reading we have also seen the way in which the motto reflects Wittgenstein's say/show distinction and the way in which it leaves room for Wittgenstein's view of ethics as ineffable but still important. Additionally, we have seen how the admonition in Section 7 of the *Tractatus* beckons not to the poverty of silence but to the richness of activity. Further, we have seen that Wittgenstein, with homage to Schopenhauer, teaches that an ethical insight is something that is not cognitively reasoned but something that is compassionately felt. Finally, we have seen that, by

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negative implication, the motto beckons the reader not to philosophical imponderables  
but to a principled life, which when lived in the present, is its own reward.

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